

## Betty Stoggs' Baby

### A Cornish Tale

On her seventeenth birthday, Betty Stoggs was up with the sun. Without wasting a minute of that day, she sat down and began peeling apples.

She wasn't peeling them to help her old mam.

She wasn't peeling them to eat, either, although more went into her mouth than into the saucepan.

Betty was trying to cut an all-in-one-piece apple peeling. She wasn't very handy with a knife, so it took thirteen apples and two nicked fingers before she got what she wanted. And then, what did she do with the apple peel but toss it away! But not just anywhere. Betty Stoggs closed her eyes and threw the peeling over her right shoulder, calling:

"Apple tree! Apple tree! Show my true love's name to me!"

When she turned round, there on the hearth lay the apple peel, curled nicely into a large and perfect J.

Betty clapped her hands in delight, although she took care to put the knife down first. If the paring told her fortune true, then surely Betty must marry a man whose name began with J.

"For I'm that old now," said Betty, "that I'll be needing a husband so's I can live happily ever after."

Betty counted up all the J's she knew on those fingers that weren't too scratched.

"There's Jacky over at Lelant -- but he's as old and shriveled as a winter apple hisself. Then there's John -- but Nan's already spoke for him. And Jim and Josiah the twins." Betty giggled. "Together they add to eighteen, but separate each one's only nine years old. I've no wish to wait for either to grow up. Jan the miner! Now there's one not too old nor too young. And not spoke for by any. It's Big Jan who'll be the husband of my very own."

So Betty Stoggs set her cap for the miner known as Big Jan. Since she was pretty and rosy as an apple herself, in no time at all the banns were called in church and they were wed. Betty Stoggs nearly always got what she wanted.

Big Jan was a tin-streamer and went down each day in the mine. This left Betty at home with his old mother. That woman had the wits of a witch when it came to thinking up chores for Betty to do. It was "Lend a hand here with the knitting, now" or "Brew a dish of tea, child" all the day through. This was not what Betty Stoggs had set her heart upon. Not at all. So she put a scowl on her forehead and let a tear come into her eye. It upset Big Jan to see her so.

"What's to be done to please ye, Betty?" asked he. "Tell me and I'll do it."

"It's my own cottage I need to make me happy. All by its own and of my own," she said.

"Well, if that's what'll please ye."

So, when Jan was not working down in the mine, he was working on building a house, and by the year's end there was as nice a little cottage as ever you saw. It was set off all by itself at the edge of a moor in a place called Towednack.

When she saw it, Betty wiped away her scowl and clapped her hands with delight. And Jan picked her up and carried her over the threshold. For a bride must always be carried over the threshold of her new home, lest she stumble and bring bad luck.

## My Own Resources ESL/EFL

There was nothing but good luck round that cottage for a while. Betty played at keeping house and whistled more cheerfully than the kettle on the hearth. Each morning Jan went off to the mine and she had the day to herself. Or what was left of it. For Betty took to lying abed, not bothering to get up and give Jan his breakfast, nor even pack him his noon bite. Indeed, sometimes it was already after noon before she got up. But Big Jan did not complain, for if Betty was happy, then so was he.

But by and by the little cottage did not look so new and neat. There were cobwebs strung from beam to rafter and dust balls in all the corners. The windows were so dirty that even the sunbeams were shut out. Betty Stoggs was not so sunny, either.

"It's fine for ye," she said to Jan, "down in the mine with others about. But I must sit here alone in a house as glum as a grave."

"Perhaps if ye swept it a bit -- "

"Only witches need brooms," retorted Betty, and she put her mouth in a pout. "It's some company I'm needing."

"Well, if that's what'll please ye."

The very next evening when Jan came home he carried his pick and shovel and something else besides. The something was a small kitten, as black as the leek pie that was at that moment burning on the hearth (for Betty had quite forgotten to turn it).

"Ah!" cried Betty when she spied the cat. "It's a tabby for my very own!" She clapped her hands with delight and wiped away the pout and put back her dimples.

So then Jan did not mind that his supper was burnt and spoilt, for if Betty was happy, then so was he.

Betty was not lonely anymore. Wherever she went, and whatever she did, she had Tabby the cat for company. It chased dust balls in the corner and played with the yarn when she worked her spinning wheel. And it rubbed its soft fur against her boots and purred when she cooked. For Betty never forgot to feed Tabby -- nor, now, Big Jan, either. And all three of them were happy in the cottage.

For a little while. But the evening came when Jan got home to find the house in a mess. The cat was howling in one corner, Betty was howling in another, and nothing at all was boiling in the pot.

"What ails the two of ye?" he asked, patting first the cat and then Betty.

"We're lonely, that's what. The kitten has no one to play with, and I've no one to talk to."

"Ye have each other," said Big Jan.

"That don't do," answered Betty. "I'm too big to play about on the floor with the cat, and all Tabby says to me is mews and purrs."

"What is it ye're needing, then?" asked Jan.

"A baby, that's what. A dear small child that'll crawl about the floor with Tabby and coo and laugh at me when I pick it up. It's a baby of our very own that will make me happy now -- and forever."

"Well, if that's what will please ye."

Before the next winter had come, there was a baby in the cottage at Towednack. It was a fine boy, named Jan for his father, and with dimples like Betty's. Betty loved Wee Jan, and so did Tabby. The cat shared his cradle, and sometimes when Betty bent over it, she thought she

could hear the both of them purring. And Wee Jan and Tabby played about on the floor and chased dust balls together and drank milk from the same bowl. The baby was so often covered with a layer of soot that Big Jan would complain that he scarce could tell which was their child and which was their cat.

Then Betty would shake her head and reply, "The moor's a cold place and the wind blows sharp. A good cover of dirt do help keep the child warm. He's happy as 'tis, and so am I."

So Betty seldom washed Wee Jan, but let the cat lick him clean when it had a mind to.

But Wee Jan grew bigger anyway, as babies will do. And sometimes he fretted and fussed, as babies will do as well. Then he was a bit of a bother to Betty. So she took to leaving the boy in the cottage every so often and going across the moor to town for a bit of milk or meat or a little gossip.

"Twill be all right," said she. "Tis just for a small time, and Wee Jan has Tabby for company."

Then Betty would tuck the child and the cat into the cradle, lock the door, and off she'd go. One midsummer afternoon she lingered in town longer than usual, hearing some especially interesting tittle-tattle. It was already dusk when she started back over the moor to Towednack. She hurried as fast as she could in the twilight, for it would never do to have Jan get home before her. When at last she saw her cottage, the door was open wide. Her heart gave a skip, for Big Jan would have found Wee Jan alone and supper not even begun.

But no smoke curled from the cottage chimney, no light shone from its window. When Betty Stoggs burst through the doorway, there was no angry Big Jan awaiting her, either. Nor any Tabby -- and no Wee Jan! The house was a shambles, the pots and pans all overturned, and the cradle empty.

"Heaven keep us!" cried Betty, and she began poking in the dusty corners and under the dirty bedclothes and in the empty cupboards, looking for her baby.

But all she found were a spider or two and a frightened mouse.

Then Betty Stoggs sat down and cried so hard that Big Jan heard her halfway across the moor as he trudged along home. And neighbors to east and west, and a full mile off, heard her, too, and came running to see what was wrong.

They found Betty tearing pieces from her apron to wipe her eyes.

"Wee Jan is gone! Stole away!" she shrilled. "Oh, never have I been so unhappy!"

Big Jan just looked at Betty Stoggs. For a minute he said nothing. Then he puffed up with rage and with grief, and when he found words, they roared out like thunder.

"Get!" he shouted. "Get ye out, Betty Stoggs! Find that dear crumb of a child, or ye'll find ye's lost your husband besides. And see how that'll please ye!"

Betty ran out the door and onto the moonlit moor, fearing for both her baby and herself. And Big Jan and the neighbors all ran out, too, all to look for Wee Jan.

"Jan! Sweet small Jan!" called Betty, and she listened for his laugh. But all she heard was the hoot of an owl.

Betty stumbled across the moor, sometimes hitting her shins on sharp stones, sometimes sinking to her boot tops in swampy places, all the time looking and calling for her baby. Big Jan and the neighbors searched as well, every bush and bank, each croft and hedge

## My Own Resources ESL/EFL

for miles about. Though the moonlight showed up everything like day, it showed no sign of any child. At daybreak, the neighbors shook their heads sadly and went to their own homes. And Big Jan took himself back to the cottage at Towednack, there to have a quiet cry.

All alone, and just as the sun broke through, Betty Stoggs heard a small sound -- no more than the chirp of a cricket. She cupped her hand to her ear and listened. It came again, but this time louder, and then she knew it well. The noise came from beneath a gorse bush, and, on her hands and knees, Betty crawled toward it. A mew -- a mew and a purr -- and when Betty parted the prickly branches, there was Tabby. Tabby looked at Betty and mewed, and then turned and licked something, and purred. What Tabby had licked was Wee Jan, lying fast asleep beneath the bush.

Betty clapped her hands in delight. Her baby was washed sweet and clean. There were herbs and flower petals to pillow his head, and he was wrapped in bright chintz cloth. Betty snatched him up, chintz and all, and ran with him to the cottage, with Tabby close behind.

When she showed Wee Jan to Big Jan, that one did not stop his crying, but cried all the harder with joy. Betty cried along with him, and then the boy awoke and cried too, but only for his breakfast. The neighbors heard and came again to see what now was amiss, and wondered at the baby, so safe and sound and clean.

They each hugged the child and then each other. But one woman, older and wiser than the others, spied a dirty mark, no bigger than a freckle, on the bottom of Wee Jan's foot.

"See here, Betty," said she. "Twas fairy folk took the child. They'd not yet quite cleaned him from tip to toe -- nice enough to go with them -- when the sun broke through and scared them off."

Everyone looked at Wee Jan's foot, and all agreed. For wasn't he wrapped in chintz as well? It's well known that fairies love bright chintz and will steal any they find that's been spread out on a bush to dry.

"Mark my words," the old woman said then. "The Small People will fetch the baby back tonight to finish the job lest ye're careful, Betty."

Betty was careful. So careful that she did not let the baby out of her sight for any bit of time, and kept him clean every bit of the time, too. She cut up the chintz to make shirts for him, and even made a curtain for the window with a piece of it. No one worked more cheerfully than Betty did now. The baby shone, the cottage shone, and Betty Stoggs did, too.

Still, no matter how hard she scrubbed, she could not wash away the dirty spot from the bottom of Wee Jan's foot.

"A fairy mark," the neighbors called it.

"A lucky spot" was what Betty called it. For it was there to remind her that she had everything she needed to make her happy now.

And forever.